

Motivation in Non-Profit Organizations

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Thesis Advisor

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Ray Montagno". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the name.

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to develop strategies for non-profit organizations to increase volunteer retention through motivation and organizational commitment. This project examines traditional theories of motivation as well as common professional Human Resources practices. These concepts are applied to the world of non-profit organizations to develop recommendations to improve volunteer retention rates.

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Introduction

Due to the nature of non-profit organizations, they usually have few paid employees on staff and heavily rely on volunteer efforts to support their organization. According to Millette and Gagné of Concordia University, “Volunteerism has been defined as unpaid help provided in an organized manner to parties to whom the worker has no obligations” (Millette & Gagné, 2008). Volunteers are one of the most important resources a non-profit organization can have, but they can also be one of the least reliable. As the very term “volunteer” suggests, they give of their time and effort voluntarily and receive nothing in return. Since volunteers are there by their own choice, they can just as easily choose not to come back the next day.

Since non-profits are dependent upon the continued service of their volunteers, it's important for organizations to retain as many volunteers as possible. Replacing volunteers can also be costly for some organizations as they may need to spend time, and sometimes even money, to train each new volunteer. In the corporate world, a company usually has a Human Resources department that creates programs and performs various other activities to try to maintain low turnover rates. Many non-profits, especially small organizations, do not have any Human Resource experts to help in this area. One key way to prevent loss of volunteers is through motivation, but there is currently very little that we know about things a volunteer organization can do to motivate volunteers and prevent them from leaving (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008).

In addition to lacking expertise in Human Resources, non-profits are also faced with the challenge of being unable to use many of the simplest forms of motivating employees

such as increase in pay or other financial reward. Because non-profits cannot use increased pay or other financial reward to motivate volunteers, they are faced with the challenge to motivate volunteers in other ways. Different people participate in the same activities to satisfy different motives. This includes volunteer-work, and satisfying those motives is an important step in sustaining volunteerism (Finkelstein, 2010). This project examines traditional motivation theories to better understand the reasons why people volunteer, and applies strategies and recommendations for non-profits to increase volunteer retention rates.

Motivational Theories & Concepts

While it is difficult to fully understand what drives human behavior, psychologists and other scholars have developed many different theories on motivation. This paper examines Maslow's hierarchy of needs, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, self-determination theory, individualism and collectivism, and organizational commitment.

Just as each person and each volunteer is different, so is each theory. While it is unlikely that a single theory can fully encompass every reason that every volunteer is motivated to engage in volunteering, most volunteers' motivations likely align to at least one of these theories. The combination of these theories will provide a clear picture that will allow volunteer coordinators, managers, or other leaders in non-profits to better understand why people choose to volunteer with their organization and how they can better motivate those volunteers to remain with the organization.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that all people are motivated by the need to satisfy five basic kinds of needs. These needs are physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs. This theory also argues that these needs are hierarchical and that the lowest-level needs must be met before an individual will seek to meet any other needs, thus the lowest level of unmet needs is the highest motivator of behavior (Jones & George, 2009). Maslow's hierarchy of needs is further illustrated in Figure 1.

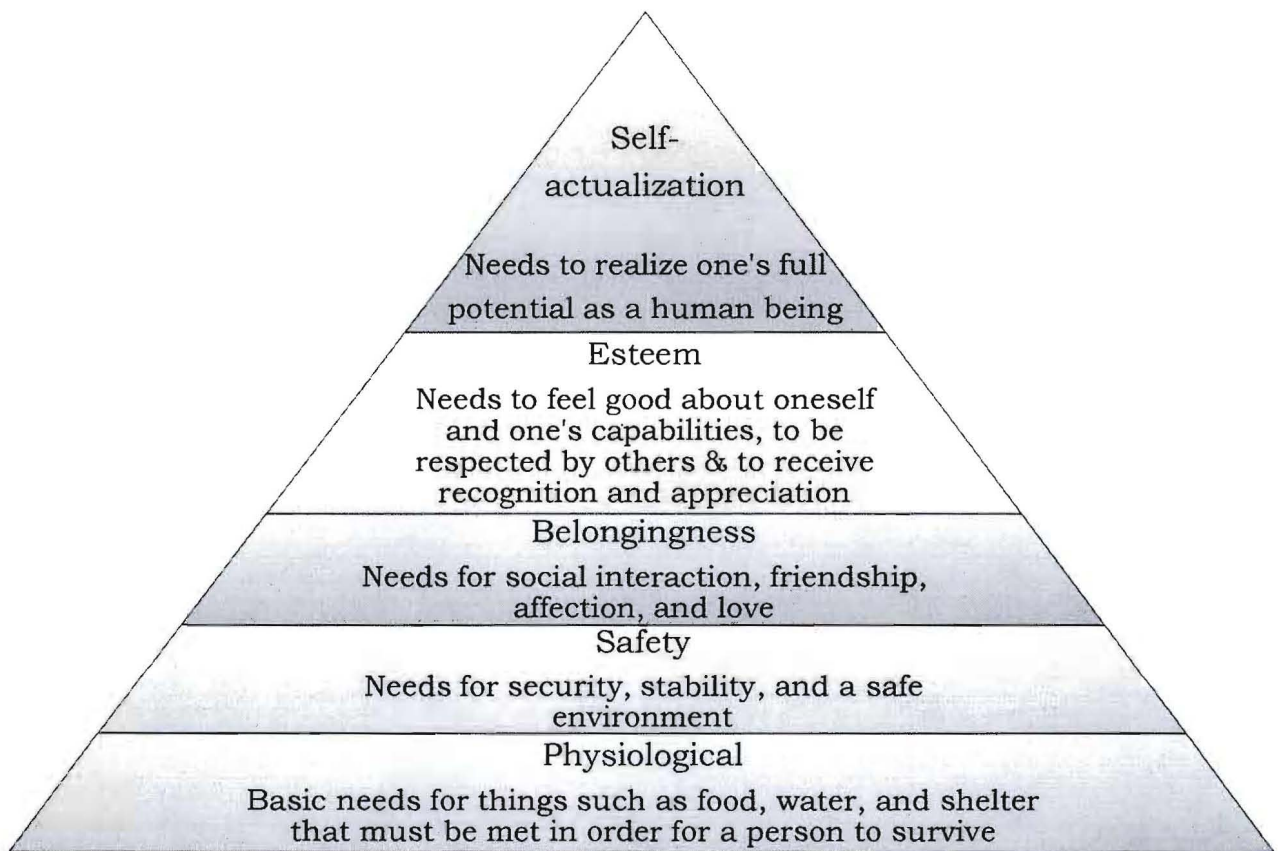


Figure 1: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

While there is some debate regarding whether there is a true hierarchy versus the idea that people may seek to meet multiple needs at once, these five types of needs are

generally accepted to be key motivators of human behavior. Because each individual is seeking to meet a different need, it is important that some aspect of volunteering continues to satisfy those needs. As long as that need is being met, volunteers are likely to stay motivated to continue volunteering. Once a particular need has been fully satisfied, that need is no longer a motivation for volunteering.

Someone who volunteers because a friend invited them to join them or because they wanted to meet new people with similar values is likely volunteering as an attempt to meet their belongingness needs.

In order to improve retention of volunteers, it is important that when a need ceases to motivate the volunteer, that there is some other motivator to replace it. This new motivator could be seeking to meet a different need, or it could be something else entirely; Maslow's hierarchy of needs is only one of many theories regarding the motivation of human behavior.

Intrinsic & Extrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is one of the most simple and straightforward motivational theories. This theory suggests that human behavior has motivations falling into two categories. Intrinsically motivated people will engage in an activity for the sake of the activity itself. One who is intrinsically motivated takes part in an activity because it is enjoyable or interesting (Millette & Gagné, 2008). For example, someone might volunteer as a tutor because they enjoy spending time with children and helping them learn. Volunteering oftentimes involves activities that it is unlikely anyone would find enjoyable or interesting though. For example, volunteers at a food bank may spend their

time repackaging carrots from 20-pound sacks into smaller bags for a single family. Unless that person really likes to package things or is fascinated by carrots, they are not intrinsically motivated.

In some ways, volunteers who are intrinsically motivated can be easier to motivate and retain because they already enjoy the tasks they are doing while volunteering. One of the most obvious ways to motivate these volunteers is to keep assigning them to the tasks they enjoy. There are many challenges that come with this though, and this is not always as straightforward as it seems. For example, someone may be intrinsically motivated to volunteer at an elementary school because they enjoy tutoring, but there may be volunteers who enjoy helping children with math assignments but not social studies or vice-versa. It's great to have volunteers who enjoy what they are doing, but volunteer coordinators should look deeper to find out what it is about what they're doing that they enjoy. Do they enjoy tutoring because they like spending time with kids, because they like math, or because they enjoy the challenge of trying to teach someone something new? All of these are intrinsic motivations, but they are very different. Once organizations understand *why* a volunteer likes to tutor (or perform any other task), they can create a more positive volunteer experience by assigning a tutor who likes math to a student with math homework instead of a student with a reading assignment.

This strategy is not always feasible because many non-profits have different needs depending on the day. Someone who usually does arts and crafts with children may arrive to volunteer one day and be asked to clean their supply room; a volunteer who helps cook at a soup kitchen may be asked to re-organize their pantry. While most volunteers understand that this will happen occasionally and don't mind, it's important to

try to find a balance between volunteers doing what they're expecting and helping with miscellaneous tasks. One way to avoid one volunteer regularly being "stuck with" these types of jobs is to rotate which day of the week these tasks are performed on. If an organization has different volunteers each day of the week, it's unlikely that the same person will be given these types of tasks multiple weeks in a row.

The other category of motivation in this theory is extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation suggests that behavior is motivated by instrumental reasons. For example, one might volunteer to meet a service hour requirement for high school graduation or to list it on a scholarship application or professional resume.

To retain volunteers who are extrinsically motivated, it is important that the organization continues to provide whatever it is that is motivating the volunteer. Many extrinsically motivated volunteers are aiming to complete a specific number of service hours. For this reason, it is important that the non-profit is able to provide volunteers with documentation of their completed service hours. This can be achieved by keeping detailed and organized records of volunteer sign-in sheets as well as having a designated supervisor or volunteer coordinator who is available to sign off on any forms that volunteers may have. There are many other "rewards" that an extrinsically motivated volunteer may be seeking. It is important for supervisors to get to know their volunteers whenever possible, as this can provide valuable insight into what motivates them.

While this is a commonly studied theory and is easy to understand, it suggests that people are strictly intrinsically or extrinsically motivated and leaves little room for any gray

areas. While it is limited, this theory in conjunction with others can still be key in understanding why people volunteer and how to motivate them to continue to do so.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory can be considered an extension of the theory of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Rather than the definitive black or white scenario proposed in the idea of intrinsic and extrinsic, self-determination theory suggests that human behavior is caused by motivations with varying degrees of self-determination and can be aligned along a spectrum of increasing levels of internalization (Millette & Gagné, 2008). Self-determination theory uses the term “external regulation,” to describe motivation very similar to the idea of extrinsic motivation. In addition to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, this theory suggests two other levels of motivation: introjected regulation and identified regulation. Table 1 describes each type of motivation within the concept of self-determination theory.

Self-Determination Theory			
External Regulation	Introjected Regulation	Identified Regulation	Intrinsic Motivation
Behavior is based on external pressures and demands or is trying to attain a reward	Engages in behavior out of self-worth contingencies	Engages in an activity because it is personally meaningful and valued	Engages in activity because it is enjoyable or interesting
Least intrinsic	-----→		Most intrinsic

Table 1: Self-Determination Theory

An example of an individual who volunteers due to introjected regulation is someone who volunteers because they believe it will make them a better person or that others will perceive them to be a better person. These volunteers are likely to respond well to public accolades or recognition as this will make them feel better about themselves as well as feel as though others think better of them.

Identified regulation is more intrinsic, and includes individuals who volunteer because they find a deeper meaning in giving back. Often this will occur when volunteers have some sort of personal connection to an organization or the cause it supports. To encourage these volunteers to remain with the organization, they should do things to help the volunteers see the impact they are making. If they value the cause but don't feel that they are doing anything useful, they will likely either leave to volunteer with a different organization or will stop volunteering all-together.

Individualism/Collectivism

There has been an ongoing debate about whether collectivism or individualism is more conducive to volunteerism. One study concluded that neither trait is more conducive to volunteer service, but that individualists and collectivist take different approaches to volunteering. While research in this field may be interesting, asking how and why each individual chooses to volunteer is likely more beneficial than asking who volunteers more (Finkelstein, 2010).

Individualists tend to focus more on their personal success and goals over the needs of a group, whereas collectivists often define themselves in terms of the groups to which they belong. Unlike individualists, collectivists will often sacrifice their own needs and wants for the good of the group as a whole (Finkelstein, 2010). An individualist who volunteers is likely to do so for reasons such as listing it on a resume or to improve their self worth, whereas a collectivist is more likely to volunteer because it is the norm within a particular group or because they believe in or support the cause of the organization where they are volunteering.

To better motivate an individualist, the organization should emphasize the personal benefits that the individual will gain by volunteering through their organization. Again, each person will have different reasons for volunteering and will be looking to gain something different, so it's important for coordinators to get to know volunteers to better understand these reasons.

Collectivists are more motivated when they feel that their work is contributing to the greater good. To retain volunteers who are motivated by collectivism, the organization

can do things to help the volunteer see the big picture of the organization, rather than just giving them a single task to perform. A volunteer coordinator could give the volunteer a tour of their entire facility, explaining each aspect of the organization in relation to what the volunteer will be doing. This will help the volunteer understand the importance of their role in the organization as a whole.

Collectivism has also been associated with role identity theory and the development of a volunteer identity (Finkelstein, 2010). With continued service, an individual may establish a volunteer role identity, which motivates them to continue the activity. The longer an individual volunteers, the more it becomes part of their daily life. The people they interact with are also volunteers and therefore their social interactions become more service oriented as well. The new volunteer identity drives additional participation in volunteer activities as the individual strives to continue to behave in a manner consistent with the new identity (Finkelstein, 2010). The concept of a volunteer identity is cyclical in that continued volunteering causes the development of a volunteer identity, but an established volunteer identity causes continued volunteering.

A volunteer identity is essentially created by a positive volunteer experience. An organization can help nurture a growing volunteer identity by creating positive experiences for their volunteers. What is considered a positive experience may vary from one individual to the next, so understanding the additional motivations for a particular volunteer is the best way to create the positive experience.

Organizational Commitment

Organizational commitment is similar to collectivism in some ways, but they are also quite different. Organizational commitment can be defined as the identification and involvement with a given organization. Organizational commitment develops when a person has a strong belief in and support of the organization's goals and values. People have a tendency to think of themselves in terms of the groups to which they belong, thus people often develop a sense of attachment to their organizations (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008). Two key aspects of organizational commitment are pride and respect. Being proud of an organization suggests that the individual believes that the organization is perceived to add positive value to society, while respect indicates a belief that the individuals themselves are positively valued by the organization and its members. When people are respected within an organization and when they feel proud of the organization, it contributes to positively identifying themselves based on that organization.

Another aspect of organizational commitment is affective commitment, or emotional attachment (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008). When volunteers are personally connected to the cause of the organization, this could lead to affective commitment. For example, a cancer survivor who volunteers with the American Cancer Society or a previously homeless person who volunteers at a shelter would likely have some degree of affective commitment to the organization. Affective commitment may also be achieved through the social interactions among volunteers and employees. When people develop a close friendship or bond with the other people in the organization, there would likely be a sense of emotional attachment to the organization because of the other people involved. Organizational commitment also includes normative commitment, which suggests that

individuals remain with an organization because they feel the mission of the organization is very worthy and it would be immoral to leave.

Building organizational commitment among volunteers can be one of the most useful strategies to motivate volunteers because once volunteers are committed to an organization, they are essentially volunteering for no reason other than to support the organization and its members. Research has shown that organizational commitment is a central indicator of work motivation among paid employees, and that it is correlated with employee turnover, absenteeism and tardiness, and behavior (Boezeman & Ellemers, 2008). Since organizational commitment is not directly related to salary or financial benefit, it is likely that these things would also apply to volunteers in non-profit organizations. A volunteer who is committed to the organization will likely volunteer more frequently and will be less likely to be late or skip volunteering for no reason. Volunteers who are committed to the organization are also likely to work harder and will try to do what's best for the organization.

Organizational commitment is also an extremely important concept for non-profits because, regardless of why an individual volunteers in the first place, there is always an opportunity to build organizational commitment among volunteers. A volunteer who initially volunteers with an organization to complete a service hour requirement may develop commitment to the organization over time. Non-profits should try to foster this sense of commitment to develop more motivated volunteers who will continue to stay with the organization even after their initial reasons for volunteering are no longer valid.

One way to motivate volunteers that will also build commitment to the organization is setting clear expectations and letting volunteers decide how to achieve them. This creates a sense of ownership and the volunteers will feel that their time spent volunteering is more meaningful and important (Musselwhite, 2011). When volunteers have a sense of ownership about the work they are doing, this will help foster a sense of pride in their work. This technique is especially useful for volunteers motivated by identified regulation, because it also makes their work more meaningful.

Recommendations

There are a multitude of different non-profit organizations in existence to serve various different purposes within a community. Different types of non-profits will likely attract a different population of volunteers. For example a rotary club will attract different volunteers than will a food bank and a food bank will attract different volunteers than an after school program. Regardless of the type of non-profit organization, it's important that they develop a volunteer motivation and retention plan. As previously stated, building organizational commitment is one of the best ways an organization can motivate its volunteers. The following recommendations are provided as a starting point that any organization could use to build organizational commitment and motivate volunteers:

- Ask volunteers to fill out a questionnaire – Many organizations already require volunteers to fill out forms with their basic information before they can begin to volunteer, so this would be a fairly simple change in their current processes. They could also re-distribute the questionnaire annually so that they can re-evaluate any volunteers whose motivations have changed. A sample of a questionnaire that a non-profit organization could use is included in Appendix A. The questionnaire is written for a fictional organization, “ABC Non-profit” that could perform any type of service. Each question on the questionnaire is followed

by a description in italics explaining the purpose of the question. This questionnaire will provide volunteer coordinators with the basic reason why a particular person chooses to volunteer. Some of the answers will be very straightforward and the coordinator will easily understand what motivates that volunteer. Others may be more complex, but this will give the coordinator a starting point.

- Get to know the volunteers – It is also a good idea for volunteer coordinators or other staff members to spend time with volunteers and get to know them better. This creates a friendly and welcoming environment for all volunteers, but also creates an opportunity to better understand some of those more complex reasons that weren't obvious from the questionnaire. For example a volunteer at a day care might respond that they are volunteering because they like working with children, but there are many different aspects of working with children. By spending time with that volunteer, the coordinator may come to learn that the volunteer is a college freshman aspiring to become a kindergarten teacher. So while they do enjoy spending time with children, volunteering is also relevant to their future career; they may also be planning on including this experience on their resume or be interested in gaining professional references.
- Motivate volunteers individually – Once the volunteer coordinator or other designated staff member is aware of the basic reasons why an individual is volunteering, it is useful to understand how to motivate each person. Many of the basic reasons for volunteering align to the previously discussed motivational theories such as self-determination theory and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Appendix B highlights the key areas where the motivational theories overlap with one another and examples of reasons for volunteering that align with each theory, as well as recommendations for motivating these volunteers.
- Publicly recognize accomplishments - A common practice used by many companies to motivate employees is the act of giving rewards. (Musselwhite, 2011) While non-profits do not typically have the option of financial rewards, there are still many other ways to reward volunteers. Public recognition can be a useful way to motivate volunteers. Many companies highlight an "Employee of the Month" to recognize employees who exceed expectations. Non-profits can implement a "Volunteer of the Month" (or of the week) program to recognize their dedicated volunteers. This will help volunteers feel more appreciated. It may also be beneficial to create the opportunity for volunteers and employees to recognize one another for outstanding work. One way to do this would be to create a "kudos" box where individuals can write positive comments or notes recognizing others who have done a good job. These notes could be read at a weekly staff meeting, typed up and included in a monthly newsletter, or hand delivered to the volunteer it is addressed to. This allows multiple people to be

recognized for their good work rather than selecting one individual each month and also helps build relationships among volunteers. People will feel good about being recognized by their peers.

- Increase responsibilities of volunteers - Many companies reward employees with promotions. While most volunteers do not have a formal position within an organization, many organizations have an informal hierarchy among volunteers and employees based on the type of tasks they perform and how frequently they volunteer. Volunteers could be “promoted” to oversee or manage a certain event or could be tasked with training new volunteers. While there is no pay that will be increased, the added responsibility will help volunteers feel valued by the organization.
- Promote positive interpersonal relations – Non-profits can benefit from promoting good interpersonal relations and hosting social activities such as a Fourth of July picnic, Christmas party, or even inviting all the volunteers and employees to go bowling at a local bowling alley. This will be especially helpful in motivating volunteers who are motivated by belongingness needs, collectivism, and organizational commitment. This also provides more opportunities for volunteer coordinators, supervisors, and other staff members to get to know volunteers, allowing them to better understand what motivates them.

By implementing some or all of these recommendations, an organization will create an environment more conducive to long term volunteering. When their individual needs are being met, and when they are committed to the organization, a volunteer will have little reason to leave the organization.

Conclusion

There is no question that non-profit organizations are dependent on the people who choose to give their time and energy to the organization. Time is a scarce resource though, and each time someone volunteers with a given organization, they are giving up time that could be spent doing other things. The act of volunteering is a conscious choice, and at any given time, a volunteer can choose to stop volunteering with a given

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Appendix A: Volunteer Questionnaire

Name: _____ Phone Number: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

____ I wish to receive ABC Non-Profit's monthly newsletter

____ I wish to be contacted for new volunteer opportunities

The above information will help indicate the level of interest the volunteer has in the organization. If they are not interested long-term, they likely will not check yes for these items.

I am interested in the following type of volunteer work:

____ Office (phone, filing, etc.)

____ Hands-on work (*this could be more specific depending on type of non-profit. Could be listed as several different categories. i.e. Food preparation, serving, cleaning, etc. could be listed separately for a soup kitchen.*)

____ Cleaning or organizing

____ Special events

____ other (please specify) _____

This will help a volunteer coordinator better assign volunteers to the type of work they are interested in. This is especially important for intrinsically motivated volunteers.

How long have you volunteered with ABC Non-Profit?

____ First time volunteer

____ 6 months

____ 1-3 years

____ 4 or more years

This will provide an indication of their current level of organizational commitment and motivation. The longer a volunteer has been with an organization, the more likely it is that they are already motivated and committed to stay.

Please list any other previous or current volunteer experience including the name of the organizations and length of service.

Volunteer history will give insight into the type of volunteering that the individual has remained with for a prolonged period of time. Someone who volunteered with one organization for a prolonged period of time likely developed organizational commitment to that organization or was intrinsically motivated and enjoyed that type of volunteering. An individual with several instances of volunteering at various organizations likely has developed a volunteer identity or is motivated by belongingness or esteem needs.

Why do you want to volunteer at ABC Non-Profit? (Select all that apply)

_____ I need to complete a service hour requirement Please indicate number of required hours and reason for service requirement: _____

_____ I want to include this on my resume, college application, or similar document.

_____ I feel good about myself when I volunteer.

_____ I enjoy the type of work I will be doing

_____ My friend volunteers / works here. Please indicate their name: _____

_____ I want to meet new people with similar interests and/or values

_____ ABC Non-Profit supports a good cause.

____ ABC Non-Profit is personally meaningful to me.

____ other (Please explain) _____

These reasons are a good beginning indicator as to why the individual is volunteering and how to motivate them. These reasons are aligned to the theories and recommendations in Appendix B.

Appendix B: Alignment of Theories and Recommendations

<i>Reason</i>	<i>Theories</i>	<i>Recommendations</i>
Service hour requirement	Extrinsic Motivation External Regulation Individualism	Maintain an updated record-keeping system and make it easy for volunteers to verify their hours. Emphasize personal benefits to the volunteer.
Include on Resume, college application, etc.	Extrinsic Motivation External Regulation Individualism	Maintain an updated record-keeping system and make it easy for volunteers to verify their hours. Emphasize personal benefits to the volunteer.
"I feel good about myself when I volunteer"	Introjected Regulation Esteem Needs	Publicly recognize these volunteers when they are doing an exceptional job. Consider implementing a "Volunteer of the Week" or similar program.
Enjoy the work	Intrinsic motivation	Ensure they continue to have activities that they enjoy. Create a rotational schedule for less enjoyable activities such as filing papers and cleaning.
"My friends work/volunteer here." "I Want to meet new people"	Belongingness Needs Organizational Commitment	Provide opportunities for social interactions among volunteers and employees. Periodically host social events.
Supports a good cause Organization is meaningful	Identified Regulation Organizational Commitment	Help volunteers see the big picture and understand the impact they are making.